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AUTHOR Blake, Robert W.
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ABSTRACT

This paper cites descriptions, by professional writers, of two stages in the composing process that appear to correspond with the two modes of mental activity separately controlled by the hemispheres of the brain. The stage of writing a first draft involves unconscious, personal, irrational, intuitive writing which may be called "writing for the left hand," since it involves the type of mental activity controlled by the right hemisphere of the brain. The stage of revising the first draft involves conscious, impersonal, rational, and intellectual writing, or "writing for the right hand." The author notes that most of the writing that students in public schools engage in, as confirmed by recent research, is writing for the right hand, and that, although this is an important type of writing, we should try to engage students in more expressive and poetic writing activities. The author urges teachers not to compare the work of one pupil with that of another; to give praise, not criticism; to stress the process of writing; and to encourage writing from the heart. The paper offers guidelines for getting students started writing and concludes with prewriting, writing, and rewriting activities for seven classroom assignments. (GW)

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Composing for the Left Hand: Writing Activities for the Intermediate Grades

Robert W. Blake

The Right Hand, the Left Hand, and Luck

We all have dim feelings of the left hand being somehow sinister, unlucky, or at least odd. In fact, the word "sinister" comes to us from French by way of Latin, in which "sinister" meant literally "left" and therefore evil or unlucky. This was so because in augury--the ancient practice of foretelling the future by signs and omens--anything that took place on the left side was inauspicious.

Conversely, the word "dexter" in Latin, meaning "right" was lucky because signs that appeared on the right side were advantageous. People today who are "dextrous" are either skilled with the body and hands or are mentally alert. And persons who are "ambidextrous" are unusually agile; they have right-handedness with both the right and left hand.

But what has this to do with writing, you may ask. Or with pupils in the intermediate grades?

Please bear with me.

So the accumulated centuries of custom have established those activities related to the right hand as being lucky, skillful, and useful. But at the same time, folk wisdom also acknowledged a strange power flowing from the left hand. After all, "The left hand is the dreamer."

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But is all this business with the right hand and the left hand reflecting two very different facets of our being only a bunch of old wives' tales?

If it is, then it appears that the old wives knew more than we gave them credit for.

The Right and Left Parts of the Brain and Two Ways of Behaving

For over a century, neurologists, those scientists who specialize in disorders of the nervous system, have been collecting evidence about how the "two modes of consciousness" as represented by the two hemispheres of the brain appear to operate. Only within the last decade or so, though, have neurosurgeons and psychiatrists confirmed that two dissimilar ways of behaving are directly related to two different parts of the brain.

Robert Ornstein, in his book The Psychology of Consciousness, summarizes the fairly recent state of thinking on the subject.[1] The cerebral cortex of the brain consists of two parts, called hemispheres, which are joined by a bundle of interconnecting fibers known as the "corpus callosum." The two hemispheres control the opposite sides of the body. Thus, the right hemisphere controls the left side while the left hemisphere controls the right side.

All well and good, if the two hemispheres regulate general physical activities. They do. But that's not all they affect. The two hemispheres also control how we perceive our world. Even though both hemispheres may share the responsibility for various human

activities, for most normal people the two parts of the brain have separate functions.

What do we know about how the two parts of the brain operate? The left hemisphere of the brain--it affects the right side of the body, remember, symbolized by the right hand--analyzes and thinks logically, especially with words and mathematical symbols and handles information sequentially. This is how Ornstein describes the function of the "right hand": "This mode of operation of necessity must underlie logical thought, since logic depends on sequence and order. Language and mathematics, both left-hemisphere activities, also depend predominantly on linear time."[2]

So what remains for the right hemisphere to take care of? It regulates the left side of the body, of course, symbolized by the left hand. The right hemisphere handles information, not in sequence, like the other side of the brain, but grasps reality all at once, as a whole. We are told that it has little concern with language and appears to help us orient ourselves in space, directs manual activities related to painting and sculpture, and work with crafts, requiring handling of objects. Our ability to remember faces seems to lie with the right hemisphere. Ornstein describes activities of the "left hand" like this: "If the left hemisphere can be termed predominantly analytic and sequential in its operation, then the right hemisphere is more holistic and relational, and more simultaneous in its mode of operation."[3]

In essence, what do the findings generally reveal? That our brains are divided into two parts. That the left hemisphere of the

brain controls the right side of the body, the right hand, so to speak, and that it deals with those mental activities that we might label as--and here I use Ornstein's word--intellectual.

That the right hemisphere of the brain controls the left side of the body, the left hand, and that it is responsible for activities that we might label--again Ornstein's choice of words--intuitive.

In case we might assume that one part of the brain directs activities which are "better" than the other, Ornstein cautions us that the two hemispheres indeed complement each other, that in every day life we simply choose the mode of consciousness appropriate for dealing with a particular situation. In fact, when we integrate the two modes of consciousness, when we combine intellect and intuition, we are most liable to achieve at the highest possible level.

Intellect and Intuition in Writing

That's what men of science say about the two modes of consciousness. What is uncanny to me is that professional writers, discussing what happens when they write, describe in their own terms two states of awareness amazingly like the two modes of consciousness pictured by the scientists. A great many writers--too many to be discounted--talk about two stages in the composing process. One is unconscious, personal, irrational, intuitive, the stage of writing a first draft at top speed, of trusting their personal muse of daemon or feelings to lead them where it will. Another stage is conscious, impersonal, rational, and intellectual, the stage of revising the first draft, of analyzing and criticizing the hastily produced words which orginially burst forth.

Let me give you just a few examples to support my contention.

In a recent article, Gail Godwin the novelist, describes the two stages in these terms. One she calls her "creative powers" and the other a "watcher at the gates."[4] She cites a passage from Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams," in which Freud quotes the German poet Schiller, who is writing to a friend complaining of his lack of creative power. Schiller suggests that his intellect may be examining too closely the ideas pouring in at the gates. Writes Schiller, "In the case of the creative mind, it seems to me, the intellect has withdrawn its watchers from the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it review and inspect the multitude. You are ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all creators . . . ."[5]

While Schiller made real the intellectual mode in writing as a "watcher at the gates," other writers personify the intuitive stage. Rudyard Kipling called this mysterious, subconscious force his "daemon."[6] Wrote Kipling: "My Daemon was with me in the Jungle Books, Kim, and both Puck books, and good care I took to walk deliberately, least he should withdraw . . . . When your Daemon is in charge, do not try to think consciously. Drift, wait, and obey . . . ."[7]

Ray Bradbury personifies the intuitive mode as his "muse" and in an essay aptly entitled "How to Keep and Feed a Muse," describes her.[8] "What is subconscious to every other man, in its creative aspect becomes, for writers, The Muse. They are two names for one thing. But no matter what we call it, here is the core of the individual we pretend

to extol, to whom we build shrines and hold lip services in our democratic society. Here is the stuff of originality."[9]

For many writers, this intuitive mode of consciousness is so potent that it essentially leads its own existence. Ray Bradbury tells of trusting his muse's ability to create. "Above all, I have never doubted my subconscious. It is my richness. It is my bank. To doubt is to destroy. To believe is to create. I believe. I believe. I believe."[10]

Writers often report that their independent intuition leads them to find out what they want to write. For John Updike, "Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what one is saying."[11]

John Ciardi tells of his unconscious helping him in this way: "The artist writes compulsively as a way of knowing himself, or of clarifying what he does not know about himself. He writes, let us say, for those glimpses of order that form can make momentarily visible."[12]

And Joan Didion, the novelist, says much the same thing about the power of her subconscious to reveal what she didn't know about herself. "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear."[13]

Perhaps William Faulkner sums up as well as anyone this awe of his personal creative powers.

> And now I realize for the first time what an amazing gift I had: Uneducated in every formal sense, without even very literate, let alone literary, companions, yet to have made the things I have made. I don't know where it all came from, I don't know why God or gods, or whoever it was, selected me to be the vessel. Believe me, this is nôt humility, false modesty: it is simply amazement.[14]

Modes of Writing in the Schools

So what has all this to do with teaching writing in the schools? For composing for the left hand?

Suppose we use the right and left hand activities of the brain as a metaphor for two kinds of writing. As we have seen, professional writers, especially those of creative writing--fiction and poetry--state that they go through two distinct stages of consciousness while composing in writing. It makes sense to me, then, to call that writing which is produced during a state of consciousness called variously analytical, sequential, rational, logical, conscious, or intellectual "writing for the right hand." In the "right hand" category we would include reports, outlines, critical essays, logical persuasive essays, business letters, and formal essays.

And it makes as much sense to call that writing which reflects a state of consciousness called holistic, nonrational, illogical, unconscious, or intuitive as "writing for the left hand." Examples of writing for the "left hand" are personal entries in diaries and journals, autobiographical personal recollections, character sketches, stories, fables, myths, personal letters, emotional persuasive essays, and figurative language of all kinds.

I have a notion that most of the writing our kids engage in the public schools is writing for the right hand. And my strong suspicions were confirmed when I read a report of research conducted by James Britton and others to find out what kids from eleven to eighteen years of age actually wrote in classrooms.[15] The research was conducted in

British schools, but I wouldn't be surprised that if we duplicated the study in American schools we would find essentially the same results.

This, in a simplified summary, is what the researchers found. They collected over 2,000 samples of writing from school children from the ages of eleven to eighteen--roughly equivalent to students in our grades seven through twelve. The samples came from classes in history, geography, religious education, science, English, and classes in "other subjects." Before the researchers analyzed the compositions, they developed two categories for analysis, one for the kind of writing done, the function category, and the other for the audience for which the writing was intended, the audience category.

The function categories were these three: transactional, expressive, and, poetic. Transactional writing was defined as writing to get the business of the world done, writing used "to record facts, exchange opinions, explain and explore ideas, construct theories; to transact business, conduct campaigns, change public opinion."[16] Expressive writing is personal writing addressed to an audience intimately known and includes exclamations, writing about feelings, thinking out loud on paper, personal diary entries, and personal letters to friends to maintain contact with them. Poetic writing is writing using language as an art medium, in which words are arranged in a conscious pattern. Such writing includes all figurative language used not to inform or to persuade but to create pleasing visual or verbal effects.

The audience categories reflected how the student writers saw the audience to which they were addressing themselves. The major divisions

were 1. child to self 2. child to teacher, including child to trusting adult and child to adult as examiner 3. child to wider audience 4. child to unknown audience (writer to his readers or public) and 5. child to additional categories, including virtual named audience and no discernible audience.

First, to what audience did the school children generally address themselves? Most students wrote for a teacher audience and particularly for the teacher as examiner. Were you surprised at that?

Second, what were the kinds of writing the school children generally produced? Most of the writing was transactional, writing to get the business of the world done, if you like, "writing for the right hand." Very little of the other varieties of writing were found. Expressive, highly personal writing to oneself or to an intimate friend, most of which we might call "writing for the left hand," was "minimally represented." Poetic writing, which again we may identify as "writing for the left hand," was significant during the first three years of what we would label secondary schooling, but it dropped off markedly during the last years of schooling. Furthermore, examples of poetic writing were found almost solely in English and Religious Education classes.

I would submit that most of the writing our kids do, like British kids, is transactional writing, writing for the right hand. I would further submit that although writing for the right hand is an important type of writing, we should try to correct this over-emphasis on transactional writing in our schools and engage our children in more

expressive and poetic writing activities, in writing activities for the left hand. I would even go so far as to suggest that very possibly during the composing process--a process which is to some degree followed by all writers during the creation of any kind of writing--that there are at least two distinct modes of consciousness, in which intuition and intellect in a complementary fashion produce far more worthwhile writing than what results from a single mode. I propose that the intellect, so to speak, may be used for organizing thoughts and details and certainly for rewriting and editing. But if we don't trust our intuition, our left hand, to spill out an abundance of deeply felt ideas, feelings, and images, the intellect well may have little of value to revise.

So, not only should we encourage kids to compose in writing for both right and left hands, we should help them learn that both the right and left hands are used during the composing process for any kind of writing.

Assumptions for Composing with the Left Hand

Let me offer some assumptions which I believe teachers should hold when they encourage kids to compose in writing and then some guidelines for teaching composing, especially for the left hand. Later I shall offer concrete examples of useful writing activities for the left hand that intermediate grade pupils may profit by.

These are some assumptions I believe are necessary to hold if one is to create a learning climate in which beginning writers can release their personal, creative powers.

1. Writing is not a superstar contest. Every person is an absolutely unique individual who happens to share common feelings and experiences with other people, with other creatures. Therefore, we can't compare the work of one pupil with that of another. And that's what marking individual compositions with letters or numerals does. We can give a grade at the end of a marking period, but we should never attempt to place writers on a bell-shaped, "normal" distribution curve.

2. Writers are pussycats. And we must teach them to become tigers. No one is more timid than the writer, especially the beginning writer. If we scold inexperienced writers, they will cower, slink, scamper, crawl, growl, or yowl. But if we pet, feed, and stroke them, they will purr, stand erect, and extend themselves fully. Writing is the supreme act of ego. To grow, an ego must have praise, not criticism.

3. Writing is a process. Nobody, contrary to all kinds of claims by instant geniuses, has ever produced worthwhile writing in one, instantaneous draft. Writing is magic, but once we learn--and trust--the steps in writing, anybody can do the tricks. Anybody! Most knowledgeable people now talk about three distinct stages in composing in writing: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. And we know that within these stages--or interrelating among them--are at least two modes of consciousness--writing for the left hand--activities which are reflected by words like remembering, flowing, being alone, feeling, associating--and writing for the right hand--which is suggested by the words outlining, gathering, ordering, examining, testing, and analyzing. If our inexperienced writers are to become successful, they need to become aware of the

stages is composing in writing and become familiar with the two modes of consciousness.

4. Writing is for lovers. And only secondarily for wheelers and dealers. Sure, manipulators need writing to get the business of the world done. But all of us need writing to show our love of life, to glorify the world--its people, creatures, water, sky, clouds, plants, rocks, and earth. Writing lets us rejoice!

5. Writing is chiefly from the heart. And only secondarily from the intellect. Writing for the left hand precedes writing for the right. Writing which reveals to us and to others our fears, dreams, desires, and loves is infinitely more exhilarating and restorative than any outline or business letter.

Guidelines for Teaching Composing for the Left Hand

So how do we engage kids in composing for the left hand? Here are some general guidelines for getting them started. After that, you only have to trust your own intuition, your personal feelings from the "left hand."

The first step is to assist them in getting in touch with their most intimate emotions. Virginia Woolf once wrote that dealing with personal "shocks" produced her best writing. Joan Didion found one or two "shimmering images" to be enough to get her started on a novel. Any consideration of a first memory, a love or hate, a secret place, or a person whom they remember with strong emotions is usually sufficient to get them going.

Writing models, both student and professional, are essential for them to see how others put similar memories and feelings into words. Pictures and photographs can be used as stimuli for writing, but I believe these are useful only for the very beginning writer.

At this first stage, you might say things like these:

What is your earliest memory? Were you terrified or very happy? Or both?

What do you love most in the world? What do you hate?

Where would you be if you could go to the place you love the most, your secret place? Describe it.

Second, get them started writing! Don't over-plan or over-discuss. Let the creative juices flow. Open the flood gates. Restrain the watcher at the gates. Make sure they start in the physical act of writing. Let them begin with a single word which leads to another word and then to a feeling, a memory, an image, a thought.

Here you might make comments such as these:

Okay, start writing.

Don't worry about it now (punctuation, spelling, handwriting, paragraphing, topic, etc.).

Let it go. Trust yourself.

Write to find out what you think or feel.

What you're writing is important, good for you.

Don't worry about it.

Do it!

Third, now that the first draft is down on paper, help them revise. Now let the watcher at the gates take over. This is the time

to rewite, rearrange, add, delete, move around, "show not tell," use specific words, imply don't state, check for spelling, punctuate correctly, and produce a manuscript which others can read without hindrances.

And at this point you can help with remarks like these:

What general impression were you trying to create? Did you succeed?

Who are you writing for? (Who is your audience?)

How's the opening? Does it grab the reader?

Does the ending work? Does it tie up things?

Go over every sentence. Does each one make sense? If you are stopped by any group of words, change them.

Do the paragraphs hang together? Have you used transitions well?

Have you explained that which is not clear? Implied that which is overstated? Added that which is missing? Cut out that which is repetitious?

Are your mechanics perfect?

A Baker's Half Dozen Activities for Composing for the Left Hand

And so finally I offer you a Baker's Half Dozen of Activities aimed at helping pupils in the intermediate grades to compose with and for the left hand. These are writing assignments that I have found successful in the classroom. The not so strange fact is that adults of all ages also get a kick out of doing these writing assignments and

and then with reading them out loud to each other.

I must give credit where credit is due. The ideas for the "wish," "lie," and "dream" poems come, of course, from that absolutely basic book on composing for the left hand, Kenneth Koch's Wishes, Lies, and Dreams.[17] The other activities are the result of my students' and my working together at this problem of turning kids onto the invigorating experience of writing for the left hand. For all but three exercises, I have set up the writing activities to allow for the three stages in the composing process: prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

1. List five things you love to do. (You and a student next to you read your lists to each other.)

2. List five things you hate to do, that upset you. (You and a student next to you read your lists to each other.)

3. Writing Your Favorite Words.

Prewriting.

Make a list of 20 words that you like. You can use names, words from other languages, names of cities or of countries, words that suggest sounds, brand names, names of colors, any 20 words. You may select them for their meanings, because they sound good to you, or just because you get a kick out of them.

Now that you have 20, cross out 5!

Writing.

Write your 15 favorite words in these blanks. Put them in any order that you like. If you care to, fool around with different combinations.

____ ____

____ ____ ____ ____

____ ____ ____ ____

____ ____ ____

____ ____

Here are some samples of 15 favorite words written by middle school students.

candle burr
tumble smile shine
saw fire water
treefort climb sway wind
eternity darkness
fungus

scrumptious artichokes
strawberry tequila hyena
luminous bowling atmosphere
sunsummer astrology horse-de-overs
hydroglifics swimming llama
gazebo

4. Writing about Your "Secret Place."

Prewriting.

Think of a place where you'd like to be more than anything else in the world.

Shut your eyes. Think about the place. Put yourself there. What do you see? Immediately before you? In the distance? To the right, the left? What do you feel? Smell? Taste? Hear?

Writing.

In sentences and in paragraph form, write down your perceptions. Before you rewrite the piece, turn to this paragraph.

> It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is deserted. The only things moving are swirls of snow. As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron. There is a privacy I love in this snowy night. Driving around, I will waste more time.

As you read and come to a place where you believe you should pause or where there is a mark of punctuation, draw a slash.

Now look at how the poet Robert Bly "lined" this particular poem. What is the effect of the word "deserted" being written off by itself?

DRIVING TO TOWN LATE TO MAIL A LETTER

It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is
deserted.
The only things moving are swirls of snow.
As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron.
There is a privacy I love in this snowy night.
Driving around, I will waste more time.

Robert W. Bly

Rewriting.

With your paragraph on your secret place, draw lines where you pause naturally or where there is a mark of punctuation.

Copy the paragraph over in verse form, writing each line you have marked off as a line in the poem. Write words on separate lines if you wish to make them stand out for some reason.

5. Writing a Wish Poem

Prewriting

What would you wish for if you could have anything you wanted? A new bike, a pair of skiis, a tennis racket, a new stereo? Colors like blue, aquamarine, orange, mauve? Drinks like nectar, champagne, or retsina? Places like Timbuctoo, Damascus, Shangra-la? Or real life or fictional heroes or heroines like Babe Ruth, Chris Evert, Huckleberry Finn, or Wonder Woman?

a. Writing.

Write a "wish poem." Begin each line with the words "I wish _____." Include in each line the name of a color, a real life person or fictional character, and a place. Be as crazy and weird as you like. See what unusual things you can put together.

I wish I were a green Superman in Peiking.
I wish I were a red Bionic Woman in Java.
I wish I were a yellow angel in Nome, Alaska.

b. Writing.

Write a "wish poem" with the whole class participating. Each person write a "I wish _____" line and have someone write the lines on the chalkboard, one after the other. Or pass around a sheet of paper with everyone taking turns writing down a "I wish _____" line. Only this time follow each "I wish _____" with the name of an animal doing something in a building.

6. Writing a Lie Poem.

Prewriting.

We all like to make up outlandish stories, to tell things that aren't true. In real life we usually get in trouble for doing so, but in poetry, we can tell lies and get away with it.

Writing.

Pair off with another student. Each of you give the other a lie, alternating your lies until you have each given five lies for a total of ten.

I am a tomato.
I have orange hair.
I am Muhammed Ali.

I live at the South Pole.
I'm Buck Rogers from Mars.
I was once a humming bird.
I was once a pyramid.
I have a brand new Datzun 280Z.
I totalled it yesterday.
I have 72 fingers.

7. Writing a Dream Poem.

Prewriting.

Try to remember a recent dream you have had. Do you have a dream which keeps on happening, a "recurring" dream? Do you dream in color or in black and white? Can you "dream" when you're wide awake and with your eyes wide open, wish you were miles away and doing or being something fantastic?

a. Writing.

Write a poem in which you start every line with "I dreamed _____." You can write about real dreams you have had or about what you daydream.

I dreamed I was floating down a river and all the monsters were after me.
I dreamed I was falling off a cliff, and before I could hit the ground I started to fly.
I dreamed I was on my own yacht sailing over water so clear I could see the bottom fifty feet below.
I dreamed a millionaire found me and wanted me to come and be his adopted daughter.

b. Writing.

Write a poem in which you describe one dream or even a series of dreams.

Here are some dream poems written by students.

Nightmare

I dreamed it was the day
of the big test
And all I could remember was
the winter solstice.

Stutson Street Bridge

When I was small,
I used to dream detail.
I dreamed I had to cross the Genesee River
and the Stutson Street Bridge was not there.

When I was small,
I used to dream absurd.
I dreamed the two banks were connected
By the foundations of a roller coaster.

When I was small,
I used to dream fear.
I dreamed I had to swing across the river
Like a lady on a trapeze or a monkey
Hand to bar, hand to bar.

When I was small,
I used to dream clever.
For just as I reached the middle
I realized how silly my dream was
And I fell into the Genesee.

Footnotes

[1]Ornstein, Robert, The Psychology of Consciousness (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).

[2]Ornstein, The Psychology of Consciousness, p. 67.

[3]Ornstein, The Psychology of Consciousness, p. 68.

[4]Godwin, Gail, "The Watcher at the Gates," "The New York Times Book Review Section," January 9, 1977, p. 31.

[5]Godwin, "The Watcher at the Gates," p. 31.

[6]Emig, Janet A. "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing," College Composition and Communication, Vol. XV (February, 1964), No. 1, p. 8.

[7]Emig, "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing," p. 8.

[8]Bradbury, Ray, "How to Keep and Feed a Muse," On Writing, By Writers, by William W. West (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1966).

[9]Bradbury, "How to Keep and Feed a Muse," p. 40.

[10]Bradbury, "Seeds of Three Stores," On Writing, By Writers, p. 51.

[11]Updike, John, "The Growth of a Short Story," On Writing, By Writers, p. 121.

[12]Ciardi, John, "John Ciardi," On Writing, By Writers, p. 136.

[13]Didion, Joan, "Why I Write," "The New York Times Book Review Section," December 5, 1976, 98.

[14]Welty, Eudora, "Review of Selected Letters of William Faulkner," "The New York Times Book Review," February 6, 1977, p. 30.

[15]Britton, James, et al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975.

[16]Britton, James, The Development of Writing Abilities, p. 88.

[17]Koch, Kenneth, Wishes, Lies, and Dreams, New York: Vintage Books, 1970.